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Notes on Stone's Nixon: Watergate, Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers

Astonishingly, Oliver Stone's latest film exonerates Richard Nixon of responsibility or blame for prolonging and expanding the Vietnam War. Much time is spent on Watergate, none at all on the relations between Watergate and his Vietnam policy. In reality, it was his Vietnam strategy and the need to keep it secret from the American public that led to his direct involvement in illegal actions that made him personally vulnerable in Watergate. And it was the exposure of these actions in the Watergate investigations and trials that led to his resignation and made the war endable by Congressional action. "Without Vietnam, there would have been no Watergate," as H.R. Haldeman correctly said in his memoirs. And without Watergate, the war would not have ended when it did.

To be sure, this story is not generally known, though more than enough evidence for it is by now available. And "Nixon," for all of its vaunted research, fails to contribute to better public understanding of it.

The effect of this is not just bad history. Properly understood, 1969-75 was a rare time when public opinion, activist protest and Congressional action really did make a difference to foreign policy: in preventing major escalations and in bringing the war, finally, to an end. (Far more than was true under Kennedy or Johnson, for example).

Yet that past effectiveness and future potential--the evidence for the power of political activity outside the Executive branch to shape foreign policy against Presidential wishes, and the responsibility and challenge that power poses--is ignored and actively obscured by this film, as it is in most academic and media accounts.

Ironically, more accurate tribute is paid to the power of these elements outside the Executive by Nixon, Kissinger and Haig in their memoirs than by Stone or others. Believing as they do (almost surely wrongly) that their strategy would not only have prolonged the war but would have won it, if they had been allowed to implement it fully, they finally broke their secrecy about the policy in the interest of blaming the loss of the war on their domestic political opponents.

I don't think they exaggerate the effects of that opposition on their policy, their actions, and on shortening the war. For once I think they are telling the truth, not producing self-serving lies, when they describe their earlier threats and readiness to escalate--delayed for fear of popular reaction--and their intention

and expectation of resuming US bombing of North and South Vietnam shortly after US troops had been withdrawn in 1973, until Watergate exploded in April and Congress banned spending on such action in August and November.

Whether that precluded a victory in Vietnam that was otherwise achievable, and whose human and political costs would have been justified, can be debated. I think they all continued sincerely to believe it, and many agree with them; I don't. But few in the media or among those in the Establishment who were not, by the end, fully supportive of the war are anxious to pursue such a debate or investigation, lest it furnish ammunition to those who accuse them of having helped to lose a war.

They prefer Stone's orthodox account: Nixon's Vietnam policy is adequately described as attempting to end the war as soon as possible in a way that would not lead to a right-wing backlash that would engulf the war's critics along with his own administration.

An alternative account:

Nixon did have a secret plan for Vietnam. It was secret from the American Congress and public, not from North Vietnam, the Soviet Union or China. It was secret because many, if not most, Americans would have opposed it, enough to block it. So it had to be concealed and lied about, and when the danger arose that those who knew the secret might reveal it to the American people [why wasn't there more fear of the Communists revealing it? Why didn't they? Have they ever done so?] extraordinary measures were taken to deter them, stop them or discredit them.

Thus a secret foreign policy led to acts of domestic cover-up, some of which were questionably legal or Constitutional, most of which were potentially embarrassing and some of which were clearly criminal. These acts of cover-up in turn had to be covered up, again by acts that were clearly criminal obstruction of justice...

In fact, it was this part of the cover-up that necessarily involved the President's interest and active participation from the very beginning, because people who were in danger of prosecution themselves were aware that the President himself had directed the controversial or illegal acts to maintain the secrecy of his foreign policy from the American public, along with the policy itself and the judgment that it had to be kept secret.

[the wiretaps; the denial that the Cambodian bombings were happening...note that that bombing remained "secret" from the American Congress, public and media even after it had been revealed in a front-page story in the NYT,, simply because the Administration said it wasn't true. That was the situation in 1969...that was all it took to conceal from the public acts of war that were well known to our adversaries...that was the state of

affairs that was threatened by the Pentagon Papers..

Nixon couldn't fear what I was saying about the period covered by the PP, about JFK and LBJ, the past. He feared what I was saying, and might bne able to prove with documents, about his policy. He didn't fear the documents I had already released; he feared the documents I might still release, documents about Vietnam (not about SIOP: nuclear targetting, yes, but not in Russia).

He didn't want to discredit me as an authority because I was attacking what was already publicly believed to be his policy. He feared that I would be believed when I said he had a secret policy, and when I said what it was. He feared this because what I was saying (and had told to Haig and HAK a yeeear earlier) was true (see my letter to the NYT in 1'970, article in NYRB in 1971--see

Tom Oliphant on WH interest); the truth hurt, it could destroy his ability to pursue the policy domestically (because too many would agree with me that it was very unlikely to achieve any success at acceptable cost, that it was much too dangerous and costly and murderous: see Murder in Laos: and experience has not indicated otherwise. It proved what I believed in 1969 and 1970-71, that the war would continue and expand

So--he had to shut me up; to make me fear what they might know and disclose (beyond what was easily findable--did HAK's charge depend on what Hunt refers to?--)(why didn't they put that out? Presumably because they thought it wouldn't hurt me; and certainly wouldn't shut me up). Finally: to incapacitate me totally. (Permanently? Or--probably--for a week or two, to get paast May 8 , not to talk about NSSM 1, how long mining had been planned and what CIA and DOD thought about what it was likely to accomplish (see Isaacson).

His secret plan remains today just as secret as it did then: despite Hersh, me, MHH... Not,. as in 1969, by denials. By ignoring it (as they ignored NSSM 1). Their cover stories are not compared to my "hypothesis" of secret plan: that is not rejected, argued against, it is simply not mentioned, not considered as a possibility. This even though Nixon, and to some extent HAK (and very much Haig) actually assert it, announce it, describe manyh elements of it. Media and most scholars simply discard or reject casually their claims, choosing to regard these as self-serving.

Why? And why does Stone c\join this cover-up? Join those at his funeral who ignore his Vietnam policy, and its costs. (No mention of the number of Americans who dies in Vietnam under Nixon! Or total tonnage of bombs, not just "secret" (sic) bombing. (On continued secrecy of total tonnage--as when I tried to describe it to anchors in 1972!))--see misstatements about bombing in Gulf War!

N had a reason that he had to try to keep Hunt from being tried, and then to keep him from talking. Stone is right about this; but

it was not because of 1960, it was because of September 1971 to May 1972, prior to Watergate.

(1) What would have happened in Vietnam if there had been no Watergate ?

2) What would have happened to me if there had been no WG?

3) What would have happened in WG if there had been no Pentagon Papers? Would there have been a Watergate? If Creep had had a comparable operation anyway, how would WG have evolved?

4) How then would WG have impacted the war?

5) Why does Stone think Nixon and HAK were so concerned about the PP, and about me?

6) Specifically, what was the incentive to go beyond indicting me (to discourage further leaking--and again, why was that so crucial?) to defaming me (as, by the way, Stone furthers, in this movie).

(Stone gives more publicity to Kissinger's alleged (still unconfirmed by documents, tapes, or HAK) slanders of me than HAK or any other journalist ever did): without giving any publicity to challenge of these or to my explicit denials)--unlike Isaacson (who doesn't print the worst of the charges) or Hersh (who does), or even Haldeman, who raises question of credibility. (NO one points out that HAK's use of me as consultant post-dates these alleged sins).

How could defaming me discourage further leakers?

Why worry about my being a leader of the antiwar movement?

What could the antiwar movement do to derail the Administration efforts to "end the war"? And why worry about there being an antiwar movement, especially after the July 15, 1971 announcement of the opening to China?

(There was, in fact, a great lull in antiwar sentiment for the rest of 1971, despite the secret "protective reaction strikes". Patricia argued persuasively against my releasing NSSM-1; it couldn't do any good, especially with Congress about to go out of session. It wasn't till the renewal of open bombing in 1972 that she said: "Do it," and the lawyers agreed. This period was comparable to the fall of 1969, from November 3 to Cambodia in April 1970.)

[Why the concern about the 1971 elections? (My trial had to be delayed till after these). See account in Marilyn Young, and bearing this had on the negotiations at that time.)

Why the references, in E's notes, to HAK's "vulnerability," or "interest"? Apparently refers to HAK and the 1969-- wiretaps, on which I had been overheard: as he knew, from Hoover's memo to him. (Thus his knowledge of my "use of drugs")--though my consultation with him in 1970 was after this). (And--did HAK ever try acid, like Kahn and the Luces, or not?)

Stone buys the cover story that they were concerned about China. But this was going to be public before the plumbers could do anything; and the Chinese didn't care anyway, as Isaacson points out. (Publicity might have riled Hoover and the Right--though not, as Stone asserted in the original script, Helms and the CIA--just as the SALT leaks might have mobilized rightwing and Pentagon objections to SALT: just as the JCS spying on HAK might have done.

Another reason for keeping the existence of the plumbers covert; probing of Young or Ehrlichman might have led to their investigation of Radford, and revealed not only the spying by the JCS but the secret channel from the White House to Moorer, bypassing Laird, the existence and secrecy of which was intended to further the process of secret threats and practice of escalation, which corresponded to Nixon's "negotiations." I.e., "diplomacy" to Nixon and Kissinger meant secret and/or illegal threats and escalations, in the interests of effectively winning the war by means that the public would have rejected on various grounds, mainly of excessive human cost and poor prospects and risk of catastrophic enlargement (including nuclear weapons, which would scarcely have been imagined unless the actual threats and plans had been revealed: which Morris or I might have done).

Stone joins the line of the obituary-writers for Nixon in 1975 who let Nixon off the hook for his continuation of the war in Vietnam and his enlargement of the air war, and who fail to challenge his claims to have "ended the war."

Several times in the movie Nixon asserts his intention to end the war and then, his success in doing so. He complains that he is given no credit, no reward for ending the war: without anyone in the movie raising the point that he did not end the war, nor did he ever intend to. The war ended under Ford, almost nine months after he left office.

The treaty he signed in January of 1973--in the context of his highly secret assurances to Thieu at the time--allowed no possibility that either the war, American military and financial support for it, or even American direct combat involvement (with airpower) would end, either in 1973 or in the foreseeable future.

As Thieu correctly perceived, and Haig confirmed to him, what Thieu was being asked to sign was not a peace treaty, but a treaty to assure continued US support to a war (including combat

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Statement in Nixon script, p. 103: Kissinger, on Daniel Ellsberg: "He's turned into a drug fiend, he shot people from helicopters in Vietnam, he has sexual relations with his wife in front of their children. He sees a shrink in LA. He's all fucked up...

A footnote to this passage in the published script, edited by Eric Hamburg, quotes John Dean in Rolling Stone, Oct. 4, 1994, as saying that he had asked Ellsberg "about Kissinger's charges. 'Absolutely untrue--all of them,' Dan said. 'In fact, claiming that I shot peasants is a horrible thing to say, it is the antithesis of my life. The contention is absurd. I find it particularly offensive because it is so contrary to what I believe.'"

The tapes on which Kissinger discussed Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers with Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Colson and others, have never been released.

The specific allegation that Kissinger claimed that Ellsberg had sexual relations with his wife in front of their children comes only from Charles Colson, as quoted by Seymour Hersh in The Price of Power, p. 385 from his interview with Colson.

"On June 16 [1971: three days after the New York Times began reprinting the Pentagon Papers], Charles Colson took two young Vietnam veterans, John O'Neill and Melville L. Stephens--both supporters of the White House war policies--to visit the President, and after a few moments Nixon summoned Kissinger. Responding to the cue, Kissinger gave what Colson recalls as 'one of his most passionate tirades. he described Ellsberg as a sexual pervert, said he shot Vietnamese from helicopters in Vietnam, used drugs, had sexual relations with his wife in front of their children. Henry said he was the most dangerous man in America today. He said he 'must be stopped at all costs.'" [end Colson quote by Hersh].

This is the only source of the allegation about sexual relations with my wife in front of our children (other references cite Hersh). But the other charges were repeated by Kissinger, according to Haldeman and Ehrlichman, the next day, June 17, in a meeting between Kissinger, Nixon, Ehrlichman and Haldeman.

Ehrlichman's handwritten notes of June 17 are the only contemporaneous record of these comments that have been released, since the tapes or transcripts have not been made public.

"(b) Ellsberg

K-- genius
brightest student ever had

shot at peasants
always a little unbalanced

* Drugs--
Flipped

hawk to peacenik in early '60's

K hasn't seen for 1 1/2 year
except at MIT--
Heckled K"

Ehrlichman did not record anything about sex in these notes, and in his account in his memoir, Witness to Power, pp. 273-74 (Pocket Books, 1982) he is elliptical:

"Kissinger was passionate in his denunciation of Daniel Ellsberg. He knew quite a bit about Ellsberg's social proclivities (which Henry deplored) and Ellsberg's conduct in Vietnam...

"In the two weeks before he left on his secret China trip, Kissinger fanned Richard Nixon's flame white-hot. Time after time Kissinger warned about the dire consequences of 'letting them get away with this,' of having Ellsberg running around loose and of permitting the Government to 'leak like a sieve.' Nixon was warned about Ellsberg. He was not the sort of fellow of whom Richard Nixon would approve. Henry dropped tidbits about Ellsberg's private life and his use of drugs." [italics added]

Haldeman's account of the June 17 conversation, in The Ends of Power, pp. 110-11:

"I was in the office when one of the angry speeches was made. As I remember, it ended with charges against Ellsberg by Kissinger that, in my opinion go beyond belief. Ellsberg, according to Henry, had weird sexual habits, used drugs, and enjoyed helicopter flights in which he would take potshots at the Vietnamese below.

"Not exactly the Chamber of Commerce's Man of the Year, if those bizarre descriptions were to be taken seriously.

"By the end of this meeting Nixon was as angry as his foreign affairs chief." [italics added]

Haldeman takes pains here to distance himself from supporting the accuracy, or even the plausibility, of Kissinger's allegations, at the very least raising the question in a reader's mind. (This may reflect the influence of a libel lawyer advising him or his publisher: a helpful influence, from my point of view.)

Likewise, in the specific reference given in the annotated script for the sex-in-front-of-children allegation, Seymour Hersh

refutes most of Kissinger's allegations or publishes my specific denials.

"Ehrlichman's notes for that day [June 17, 1971], as published by the House Impeachment Committee, showed that Kissinger depicted Ellsberg as a half-crazed genius whose views on the war had turned dovish with excessive drug use and aberrant sexuality. [Actually, the notes do not mention sexuality, let alone the specific charge reported by Colson from the previous day; and "half-crazed" is Hersh's paraphrase of "always a little unbalanced."] It was a shrewd performance that played perfectly to the prejudices of Nixon and his two top aides. It was also an exercise in character assassination... Kissinger described Ellsberg as a "genius" who was the "brightest student" he ever had at Harvard. (Kissinger had, in fact, never taught Ellsberg.) Ellsberg was further described as one who "shot at peasants" while assigned as an embassy aide in Vietnam and who seemed "always a little unbalanced." (Ellsberg has emphatically denied ever shooting at civilians while in Vietnam). ...Kissinger told the President that he hadn't seen Ellsberg in a year and a half, except for the meeting at MIT at which Ellsberg had 'heckled' him. (The two had met the previous August at San Clemente and again a month later when Ellsberg urged Kissinger to read the Pentagon Papers.)" [Hersh, The Price of Power, p. 384]

On the next page, in citing Colson's account of the June 16 charges, which included the sex-children slander, Hersh did not cite my specific denials, feeling, reasonably, that he had sufficiently alerted the reader to questions about the reliability of Kissinger's claims on the previous page.

Another place referenced by the annotated script where the sex-children charge is repeated (citing Hersh), Nixon, vol. II by the historian Stephen Ambrose, likewise presents a statement by Haldeman, from an interview by Ambrose, that characterizes Kissinger's "performance" in attacking me as "beyond belief." Describing the June 17 discussion between Nixon, Kissinger, Haldeman and Ehrlichman (Ambrose, pp. 446-47), Ambrose says:

"So in the Oval Office, Kissinger proceeded to put on a performance that Haldeman characterized as 'beyond belief.' He was enraged. His paranoia poured out of him., It was "one of his most passionate tirades." [Ambrose footnotes these quotes to a Haldeman interview.] Kissinger said Ellsberg was a "genius," of the [sic] "brightest student[s]" at Harvard [sic], but a man fatally flawed. He was a sexual pervert who made love with his wife in front of his children. He was a drug abuser. He had once been a hawk who enjoyed shooting Vietnamese peasants from helicopters in Vietnam, but had gone from 'hawk' to peacenik.' He had in his possession critical defense secrets of current validity, such as nuclear targeting. Kissinger described Ellsberg as 'the most dangerous man in America today,' who 'must be stopped at all costs.'"

In quoting Haldeman and in describing this as a "diatribe" (in the next sentence), like Haldeman and Hersh and Dean--in contrast to the film as seen by audiences--Ambrose does flag the question of reliability. (In other respects, Ambrose's account does not meet the highest standards of historical citation. What he presents as a presentation made in front of Haldeman and Ehrlichman on June 17 actually includes assertions--including the critical one that Ellsberg "made love with his wife in front of their children" (a paraphrase of Colson's quotation of Kissinger's "had sexual intercourse with his wife," which appears in the film)--that according to the very source that Ambrose cites, Hersh's book, were not made in the presence of Haldeman or Ehrlichman or on June 16 in the conversation Ambrose is recounting, but were made in front of Colson and two veterans, according to Hersh's interview of Colson, on June 16, the day before. This is also true of the words "sexual pervert" and the reference to shooting from helicopters, neither of which appear in Ehrlichman's notes of June 17.

Likewise, Ambrose's referenced source for these statements, Hersh's Price of Power, pp. 384-85, citing Ehrlichman's notes, quotes them accurately and completely in saying that "Ellsberg was further described as one who 'shot at peasants'" , following it by my "emphatic" denial that I ever shot at civilians. How did this get to be rendered by Ambrose, "a hawk who enjoyed shooting Vietnamese peasants from helicopters in Vietnam"? Since even Colson doesn't mention the word "enjoyed," Ambrose's source here--which he fails to identify or cite--is clearly Haldeman's The Ends of Power, pp. 110-11, which says, "Ellsberg, according to Henry...enjoyed helicopter flights [italics added] in which he would take potshots at the Vietnamese below." Ambrose's formulation of this is no less false to the fact, but perhaps a shade more slanderous. This may seem a niggling point to persons other than the one being slandered.

The editor of the published "shooting script" notes at the onset:

"In a few instances where facts are in dispute, the writers have used reasonable speculation arising from the information available. This annotated script reflects a sampling of the historical material on which the writers drew in creating this story of Richard Nixon." [footnote, p. 83]

For "the language of Kissinger's tirade about Ellsberg," the footnote reference to the script cites five works, by Ambrose, Aitken, Wicker, Hersh and Dean. I don't have the books by Aitken or Wicker at hand. But of the three I have seen and cited above, by Hersh, Dean and Ambrose, two of them quote my specific denials of Kissinger's charges and the third, Ambrose, cites Haldeman's "beyond belief" comment. So the writers were clearly warned in their research that these patently defamatory charges by Kissinger were, to say the least, subject to question as to their truth.

Yet their film script, as shown on the screen, gives no hint at all to the mass audience that viewed it that these particular defamatory statements might not be true. The skepticism actually reported by Haldeman in his memoir could easily have been expressed in one of a dozen ways on the screen. It is not.

There is an entire (invented) scene--Scene 91, pp. 258-61--in which Ehrlichman and Haldeman raise questions about the veracity or validity of statements that Nixon has made, and throughout the film characters challenge each other's statements or motives, sometimes jokingly and sometimes viciously. But not in the case of Kissinger's assertions about Ellsberg. Reasons are presented (not the real ones, I believe) why Kissinger would want to "stop" and "discredit" Ellsberg, but no suggestion that the charges he proposes to publicize are false. Kissinger is not presented in the film as a very dignified or sympathetic character, but the audience will be well aware that he became Secretary of State and received a Nobel Prize. (A major fault of the movie, in my eyes, is that it gives the audience no reason to realize just how ill-deserved that Prize was). Various personality defects of Henry Kissinger are shown, but not a lack of veracity, on this or any other subject.

Stone and his writers have given mass dissemination to a slander without any indication to a hearer that it might not be true, and without having made any effort whatever to determine for themselves whether or not it was true, knowing that it had been denied by the target. (Had they investigated, they would have not found a shred of basis for either of the charges, about sexual intercourse in in front of children or of shooting civilians, from helicopters or otherwise, with or without enjoyment).

Comments:

1. At no time in the development or production of this film, up to the present (February 26) has any representative of Stone, his writers or his organization made any attempt to contact me for any reason, for comments on the veracity of defamatory statements made about me. That is also true for my former wife, also seriously defamed, and my two grown children referred to.

2. This is in contrast to the experience of John Dean, who reports (in an essay included in Nixon, ed. Eric Hamburg, p. 4) that "a couple of information polluters and sleaze suckers had waded into the muck and mire of Watergate to produce a new revisionist account of the events." He is referring here not to Stone and his writers but to the authors of Silent Coup, which (on the basis of my own best judgment) slanders Dean.

"When I discovered fragments of this baseless revisionism in Oliver Stone's script, I doubted I wanted anything to do with the project. My doubts, however, were proven to be totally misplaced. When Oliver Stone learned the true facts (which he personally

checked by talking with the persons involved), he pulled the phony material from his film. Thus, there was no question in my mind about the sincerity and legitimacy of his effort to base the film on hard information."

It would be easier to agree with Dean's conclusion if I or my former wife and my children had had comparable experience, or even the opportunity to see portions of the draft script in advance.

3. My former wife is in no sense a "public figure," nor is either of my children. In fact, she long ago reverted to her maiden name for professional purposes, precisely to avoid unwanted publicity. She is a registered nurse and has a doctorate in psychology; she is head of a pain program at the Veterans' Administration in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, in her professional circles it is generally known that Dr. Carol Cummings is the former wife of Daniel Ellsberg, and the reference in the film has elicited a number of expressions of concern, and undoubtedly far more attention than has been expressed to her.

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Scene 6, Nixon, p. 103:

Nixon: "It's your people who are leaking to the Times. wasn't this Ellsberg a student of yours at Harvard? [No. I was never a student of Kissinger's in any sense.] He was your idea; why are you suddenly running for cover?

Kissinger: He was, he was. [See above. Ehrlichman's notes of June 17, 1971, record Kissinger saying to the President, with Haldeman and Ehrlichman present, about Ellsberg: "Brightest student ever had."] We taught a class together at Harvard.

[No, we did not. I gave guest lectures on three occasions, widely separated--spring of 1959, mid-60's, and spring 1968--to his Defense Policy Seminar at Harvard. Haldeman gets this right in The Ends of Power, p. 110: "Henry had a problem because Ellsberg had been one of his 'boys.' (He had lectured at Kissinger's Defense Policy Seminars at Harvard in the 1960s)."]

But you know these back-stabbing Ivy League intellectuals, they can't...

Nixon (cold): No, Henry, I don't.

Kissinger: He's turned into a drug fiend, he shot people from helicopters in Vietnam, he has sexual relations with his wife in front of their children. He sees a shrink in LA. He's all fucked up. Now he's trying to be a hero to the liberals...If he gets away with it, everybody will follow his lead. he must be stopped at all costs.